

Grandson of the Circus

by Jack Ferrell

I've always been a wanderer. Whether it's places, homes, or jobs, I've always been on the move looking for something different. It comes naturally and started early. It's in my blood.

My mother's and father's parents harbored desires to wander, which they inherited from their ancestors. My maternal grandparents and great grandfather were in the circus. My paternal grandfather was an itinerant preacher and his wife's grandparents left everything familiar to them in Germany to move to the United States in the 19th century.

I was fortunate as a child to spend a lot of time every summer with my grandparents and great grandparents. My maternal grandmother, whom we called Mom, lived near Akron, Ohio, and she would regale me with stories and pictures of my ancestors. I saw old photos of my mother's father as an aerialist and my grandmother as a member of a band in one of the many circuses which crisscrossed the country early in the 20th century. My mother's grandfather was the leader of that circus band and when they were not playing for the circus he traveled around the Midwest on the vaudeville circuit. I also spent time with my paternal grandparents and great grandparents in Warsaw, Ohio. My great grandmother, Lucille Lindt, whose parents had immigrated from Germany in the 19th century, told me stories about a world far from Ohio. Grandpa Ferrell was a carpenter and itinerant preacher, who often took me to tent revival meetings which I found frightening at times but also exciting, because the drama inside that tent on hot and humid nights was so different from what I was accustomed to at home. These summers steeped me in stories of foreign places and other-worldly experiences which inflamed my imagination.

My mother and dad were not immune to wanderlust. My family moved four times to different towns in Ohio before I reached the age of seven. My father held a number of jobs. He had been a bar owner and a clerk for the railroad and worked at Akron Brass which manufactured fittings for firefighting equipment and ships. After World War II he hauled coal and gravel and became a foreman at a pottery. In 1947 he started selling pottery lawn ornaments and vegetables at a roadside stand on U.S. Route 250 two miles outside of Wooster, Ohio. That specific spot along the highway was important to my father because it was the main route the local Amish people took to get into town, driving their buggies right by my father's stand. Within a year after setting up the stand, Dad and his father built a house for us and a small grocery store at that spot along the highway where I was to live with my four siblings for the next ten years, learning the grocery business and the elements of customer service.

My father built a good business specializing in meats, cheeses and homemade ice cream. He also had a "huckster" route, as he called it, selling staples to the Amish community out of a converted school bus. Working in the store and accompanying my dad on the "huckster" route gave me an op-

portunity to interact with and serve different kinds of people and learn different traditions. Although I was not traveling outside the boundaries of three counties in northeastern Ohio, I was exposed to other worlds.

Then an important friendship developed between a foreign exchange student and me at the high school in our little town of Apple Creek. It was 1957 when I met Georg Pfäfflin from Germany. He was a pastor's son hosted in Apple Creek by our pastor. Rev. Hartmann charged me with the responsibility of keeping Georg out of trouble during the year he was to live in our community. That job took a lot of effort and as a consequence Georg and I became very close friends. It was educational and fun getting to know him and getting to know about his country and their way of life. During the course of those first six months, I became intrigued with the idea of a full immersion experience in a foreign culture. With Georg's encouragement I applied to become an exchange student in France under the auspices of the International Christian Youth Exchange. I was accepted and scheduled to depart for France in July 1958, but as fate would have it, President Eisenhower and General DeGaulle got into a tiff that spring and canceled all cultural exchanges between the United States and France six weeks before I was to depart. Fortunately, a family near Hamburg, Germany, agreed to host me. Armed with only three German words (*ja, nein, danke*), I sailed from New York City aboard the Aurora Sky for the ten-day crossing to Bremerhaven.

It was a life-changing experience for a seventeen-year-old kid from a small farming town in northeastern Ohio. I was welcomed by a large loving family who treated me as one of their own. During the year I was there I not only learned another language, drank my first beer and lived in an urban setting of over 1.5 million people, which I had never experienced before, but also I was able to travel by train and bus around western Europe. I visited France, Belgium, Holland, Austria and Italy—places I had only read about in books I borrowed from our county library bookmobile.

Upon my return to Ohio the following year, I started college as a geology major, worked as a janitor in an elementary school, and nursed this strong desire within me to explore the world.

By the end of the third semester I was really struggling to successfully complete the math requirements of my major. While standing in line during class registration in the gymnasium in front of the geology table to sign up for the next semester's courses, I decided at the last minute to change my major course of study. Since the academic departments' tables were arranged alphabetically, I simply moved from geology to German.

In the late winter and early spring of 1961, I started making major changes in the direction of my life. Not only had I changed my major in college with the idea of pursuing a career in the foreign service, I had also exchanged my job as a janitor for a job as a farmhand, and most importantly I was dating my former high school sweetheart, Cheryl.

Cheryl and I married that fall. During the next two years, my grades improved dramatically, I took on a job in a paint brush factory, our son Brian was born, and I graduated with a B.A.

My plan since my junior year had been to pursue a master's degree at The Ohio State University in preparation for a career in the Department of State, but my academic adviser at the College of Wooster would not recommend me for the program at Ohio State, so I decided to join the Navy. John Kennedy was President and there was a lot of idealism and thoughts of service to one's country floating around at that time. My thinking was that I would put in my four years in the military, go to graduate school, and then take the foreign service exam. I went to the Navy recruiter's office. He was too busy to talk with me, so I left. On my way out of the building an Air Force recruiter popped out of his office and asked me in.

In September 1963 I found myself in Officer Training School at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. Twenty years, three overseas tours and nine family moves later, I retired from the U.S. Air Force. I did not originally intend to spend that much time in the Air Force. Six months before my scheduled discharge in 1967 I received a letter from the U.S. Air Force Academy offering to send me back to school to obtain a Master's degree followed by a position as an instructor at the Academy. After I completed two years on the faculty there and a one-year stint in Vietnam, the Academy sent me back to grad school in 1972, where I received a doctorate and then returned to the Academy as an Associate Professor of German.

Following my retirement from the Air Force in 1983 as an intelligence officer, I moved to Southern California to work for Northrup Corporation. In 1984 I moved to Nebraska where I worked for ten years as a corporate executive at First Data Resources. The job required a lot of travel, which fed the bug and I could not get it out of my system even when I was at home. That impulse to wander even infected my wife. We always used our time off from work to go on camping trips or on cruises.

In 1994 we purchased an old farmhouse on Cape Cod that had been turned into a guest house. After renovation we operated it as a bed and breakfast, where we welcomed people from all over the world. It kept us very busy for seven years, restricting our heretofore nomadic lifestyle. Even though the inn prevented us from making forays overseas, it did bring the world to us in the form of guests from Great Britain, Ireland, Iceland, Germany, France, Italy, India, Japan and the Philippines.

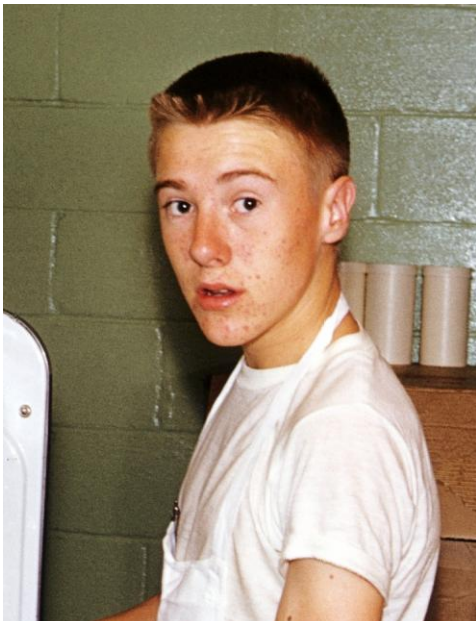
Soon we discovered that few guests would come in the winter, so we decided to close during the months of January and February. That allowed us to catch our breath and to complete any needed maintenance and it also gave us the opportunity to wander again.

In February 1999 I spent a month backpacking in Chile with our two sons, Brian and Sean, allowing the three of us to share our mutual desire to explore. You see they too are descendents of circus people. We hiked both ends and the middle of the country—Patagonia, Isla de Chiloe and the Atacama Desert. Although it is considered the driest desert in the world, it rained while we were there. It had not rained in over 20 years. It was an unforgettable treat to witness the people's reactions to something many had never experienced.

Since moving to New Mexico in 2003, our wanderlust has taken full rein. Our son goes so far as to claim that our house is the most expensive storage unit in New Mexico. Every year Cheryl and I plan

at least one major camping trip in our motor home allowing us to head out like gypsies for up to two months roving around North America. And every year we undertake an inn-to-inn walk, which we have done in Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Cornwall, France, and Germany. It's in our blood.

In the end how can the great-grandson of immigrants and the grandson of circus people and an itinerant preacher not be filled with wanderlust? How can he not want to experience some thing or some place new or different? How can he and now his sons not be wanderers?



Jack at Guerne farm market



Jack and Bobby, circa 1948.